

I've been doing a lot of reading lately. Book reading! Though I always manage to squeeze in magazines and newspapers (short-term commitments, right?), my quality time with books tends to wax and wane according to my schedule, energy level, and general mood. So I'm happy to say that, currently, I am on a roll.



Apparently, however, I'm in the minority. According to a recent report by the National Endowment for the Arts, fewer than half of Americans read literature. (You know, the stuff that's not just good, but good for you?) Actually, book reading has been in decline for over a decade, with literature taking the hardest hit. Between 1992 and 2002, the percentage of American adults who read any book at all dropped 7 percent, while literary reading dropped a whopping 14 percent, says the NEA. No doubt sensitive to these statistics, the Atlanta Journal Constitution just eliminated its book editor position, causing a great stir in the Southern literary community. Syndicated columnist Kathleen Parker lamented this turn of events in an essay last week, pointing out that, ten years ago, there were 10-12 stand-alone book sections in national newspapers, whereas, today, there are only five. According to Parker, "the systematic gutting of culture from newspapers is symptomatic of a broadening illiteracy that bodes ill for the republic." But why does it bode ill? Why should we care that people aren't reading books like they used to? Are we not replacing those books with other perfectly good sources of entertainment and information? Movies? Reality TV? Internet blogs? Video games? What's so special about the almighty Book? Especially that sometimes hard-to-define, often hard-to-slog-through thing called literature?

Well, let's take me, for example. (Did you really think I wouldn't bring it back around to me?) Over the past couple of weeks, I read *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis's witty and illuminating explication of his faith written in 1943, and *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy's stunningly bleak, post-apocalyptic novel that just won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature. These very different books posit different views of the world and man's place in it (though not, I would argue, as different as you might expect), and each, in its way, enriched my own world view, which is a work in progress. I believe I'm farther along in that progress for having read these good books, each of which challenged my mind and nourished my soul. Does this mean I believe everything I read? Certainly not. In fact, the more I read, the easier it is to know what I do not believe. And what I do.

In other words, the more literature we consume – and by literature, I mean "serious" writing of widely-recognized artistic value – the better we understand ourselves and our relationship to the world... and the closer we come to answering those two essential, age-old questions: *Why Are We Here*, and *How Should We Live*? There was a time when this sort of understanding was the goal of education – especially higher education – and that goal was pursued by exposure to great works of literature, history, philosophy, religion, and art.

But in contemporary America, the goal of a liberal education is no longer to understand one's place and purpose in the context of a grand tradition. The goal now, it seems, is to debunk the notion that there are any grand traditions – or that any tradition might be grander than another, any philosophy wiser than another, any culture more virtuous than another, any religion more humane or sustaining than another. In our great march toward openness, tolerance, and equality, we've become a society that believes, above all – if we believe anything – that nothing's better than anything else... that all truth is relative and morality, subjective.

On what foundation, then, do we build our intellectual and spiritual homes? On Science,

which tells us how we are made, but not why? On pop psychology, which fluctuates with the frequency of Oprah's weight? From what solid platform do we make our flying leap into the world of ideas? To try our wings we must first have a nest to leave. Relativism is a pretty flimsy excuse for a nest.

In 1987, I graduated from my small liberal arts college and blithely traipsed off to graduate school, where, in the course of obtaining a masters degree in English, I would become hopelessly entangled in the perplexities of something called "deconstruction" (an emperor with no clothes if ever there was one, only how could I know that then?). That very same year, a college professor named Allan Bloom was publishing his book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, about what he called "the dismantling of the liberal education." This is the book I'm currently reading, and I can hardly believe how relevant his 20-year-old analysis is today. When Bloom began teaching in the 1960s, American college freshmen, though lacking the strong background in history, literature, and philosophy that their European counterparts possessed, all came to the Ivory Tower with at least a working knowledge of Founding literature (the Declaration, Constitution, etc.) and the Bible. This was their common ground, their shared body of knowledge, their "nest." In the two decades that followed, Bloom saw this collective knowledge all but disappear. During the Civil Rights era and its aftermath, as more and more skepticism was directed at the early settlers, the Founding Fathers, capitalism, democracy, and the American Experiment in general, students began learning less American history, less American political philosophy, and what they did learn left them feeling ambivalent. Religious learning, too, became a casualty of our growing obsession with sexual freedom, self-expression and taboo busting. Families stopped going to church together, stopped praying together, and the Bible – so long our moral compass and great common epic – became just another book on the shelf, lodged uncomfortably between *Catcher in the Rye* and *The Feminine Mystique*.

Bloom writes, "Without the great revelations, epics and philosophies as part of our natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside. The Bible is not the only means to furnish a mind, but without a book of similar gravity, read with the gravity of the potential believer, it will remain unfurnished."

Twenty years later, while we hardly lack "mental furniture," ours is mostly of the cheap, temporary, and faddish variety. Where are the sturdy, classic pieces that will comfort and sustain us through a lifetime? Where are the timeless antiques? Just this month, coinciding with Shakespeare's birthday, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni surveyed 70 of the nation's top colleges and universities to see where The Bard stands in today's curriculum. Out of those 70, only 15 require English majors to take a course in Shakespeare. According to the study, this trend has been growing for decades, but has gotten much worse over the past ten years. As schools relax requirements relating to Shakespeare and other great writers, courses involving popular culture and current events are multiplying rapidly under the umbrella of "English" studies.

At Princeton, English majors can take a class on AIDS; at American University, they can study 'Hollywood of the 1970s'; the University of Pennsylvania offers its English students a course on Madonna (not the Virgin Mother), and Northwestern has a popular class on *Baywatch*. At Penn State, one can earn credits toward his English major with a course called "Queer Mobility" (huh?); and at Duke, the English department offers "Creepy Kids in Fiction and Film," in which students focus on "weirdoes, creeps, freaks, and geeks of the truly evil variety." The aim of the course? To study how films showcasing "a child's irregularity or abnormality" make us "freak out." In this course, students study such masterworks as *The Omen*, *The Sixth*

Sense, and Stephen King's Children of the Corn.

And speaking of film courses posing as English... guess what now infamous English major took "Contemporary Horror," in which the class watched *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and explored, according to the course description, "how horror has become a masochistic pleasure." Need a hint? The popular course is offered through the English Department at Virginia Tech.

But let us not, gentlefolk of the 21st century, be judgmental. Let us not discriminate, distinguish, nor differentiate. Who are we to say that *Macbeth* is better for us than *Baywatch*? That Milton is a finer poet than Madonna? That the plays of Euripides might actually elucidate our understanding of 'Hollywood in the 70s'? Why consult the wisdom of the ages when ours is the only age that matters? Why explore tradition and risk feeling oppressed by the majority? Why attempt to acquaint ourselves with the greatest literature ever written, the greatest thoughts ever... thunk? The whole concept of "greatest" is passé, anyway, since greatness is completely subjective. Like truth, right? And morality?

If this kind of thinking scares you as much as it scares me – if you fear for our culture and worry that soon we won't have one – then start your own revolution by heading to the downtown library. There you'll find several copies of *The Closing of the American Mind*. And while you're at it, why not check out some Shakespeare, too? The guy's no Madonna, but he's not half bad.